

AQUAMAN THE MOVIE AS A LATE MODERN FAIRY TALE

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ABSTRACT

The feature film *Aquaman* (2018, directed by James Wan) is the most commercially successful superhero movie belonging to the DC Extended Universe. Produced by DC Films and Warner Bros. Pictures, the motion picture portrays a rebellious superhero with an extraordinary physical presence. The paper aims to reflect on the movie *Aquaman* and its ability to function as a late modern fairy tale. *Aquaman*'s genre structure includes elements of fantasy, science-fiction and action film. However, the authors work with the assumption that the story is, in its nature, a fairy tale involving late modern means of expression. The first part of the text is largely theoretical, outlining the movie's importance and defining the genre of a fairy tale in the context of late modern culture. Following the given line of thought, the second part of the paper presents a narrative analysis of the film in question, which is based on Propp's morphology of fairy tales.

Keywords: *Aquaman, DC Extended Universe, fairy tale, late modern culture, Propp's morphology of the folktale*

INTRODUCTION

Aquaman, also known as Arthur Curry or "the King of the Seven Seas", has been an important character in the DC Comics' portfolio since his debut appearance in 1941. R. Duncan and M. J. Smith emphasize that probably no other major comic book character created by DC has appeared in so many comic book titles or undergone so many revisions and reinterpretations. *Aquaman*'s ability to survive both on the surface and underwater allows him to battle dangerous enemies who walk the Earth, as well as those who reside within our planet's vast oceanic expanses. The character was originally created by the writer Mort Weisinger and the artist Paul Norris.[1] As a comic book character, *Aquaman* has existed and thrived for more than seven decades. This unconventional superhero may have appeared in a number of audiovisual media products (most of which were animated and some even direct-to-DVD), but his live-action breakthrough came along much later, with the media franchise known as the DC Extended Universe, alongside Superman (or Man of Steel), Batman, Wonder Woman, Flash and other DC superheroes. Mainstream Hollywood cinema has changed this fair-

haired superhero into a tall, exotic and overly masculine man with the instantly recognizable face of the American actor Jason Momoa.

The movie *Aquaman* was released in 2018. Inspired by the commercial success of their competitors – producers of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), media professionals responsible for establishing the DC Extended Universe (DCEU) loosely based Arthur Curry’s live-action adventure on a range of comic book narratives, transforming them in a manner that defines 21st century blockbusters with superheroic protagonists. We might say that the feature film is a spin-off associated with the previous DCEU movies *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* and *Justice League* (2016, 2017, both directed by Zack Snyder). Aquaman’s presence in these movies was not too prominent, as he was only a supporting character. However, his brief appearances in the above-mentioned film projects can also be seen as starting points for the consequent production of Aquaman’s origin story. Aquaman is the most commercially successful product of the DCEU, as the motion picture’s worldwide box office grosses exceeded 1.1 billion USD. Surprisingly enough, the movie’s remarkable profit was achieved mostly thanks to non-American cinemagoers, who generated more than 70% of its worldwide revenues.[2] It is necessary to note that in 2018, no other feature film produced by Warner Bros. Pictures was able to accomplish box office performance like this.

The paper’s objective is to discuss Aquaman the movie in terms of its ability to convey both late modern cultural elements and components found in traditional fairy tales. The basic assumption is that even though Aquaman’s story should primarily be perceived as a science-fiction movie, given that its main protagonist is a comic book superhero, the film’s genre determination is, in fact, much more complex. Since our ambition is to point out that Aquaman the movie is rather a result of extensive genre hybridization involving elements of science-fiction, fantasy (especially fairy tale) and action movies, we apply the principles of narrative analysis in order to identify the different genre components. The analysis is largely based on V. Propp’s *Morphology of the Folk Tale* [3] and complemented by procedures typical for discourse analysis. The main research question leads towards identifying which genre elements can be identified within the movie’s narrative structure. According to L. Rusňáková, narrative analysis is closely related to genre studies. Each media product has obvious genre indicators that guide us, letting us know how we should approach its story. We understand “genre” as a set of formal and content elements of a specific work. It also determines the communication’s target audiences. While talking about genres, we refer to stable, recurring types or categories of media products characterized by their common features (thematic, compositional, formal elements).[4] Following this line of thought, we pose three research questions:

RQ1: Which genres can be identified in Aquaman?

RQ2: To what extent the film corresponds with Propp's morphology of the folk tale?

RQ3: Which aspects of late modern culture are communicated via the movie's storyline?

AQUAMAN: HOLLYWOOD'S MOST SUCCESSFUL "METAHUMAN"

As noted above, Aquaman's main protagonist is, predictably enough, Arthur Curry, a young man nicknamed "Aquaman" by social media. Curry is thought to be a so-called metahuman, in other words, a superhero ("metahumans" are present in all movies comprising the DC Extended Universe). The hero is a hyper-individualist. As the audience can see, he often helps people in distress, especially if the threats they are facing are related to the aquatic element. He grew up with his father Tom in the coastal area of Maine, the easternmost state of the USA. Curry bears strong Polynesian facial features of his father and he sometimes uses expressions corresponding to the Maori language. The tattoos that cover large parts of his chest and arms are also Maori. Although his father's Maori ancestry is obvious, both men act as regular Americans stereotyped by decades of Hollywood production, driving a pick-up truck and spending their free time in a local pub. The main character's parents named their son Arthur with an explicit reference to King Arthur, the legendary figure of Anglo-Saxon culture, which only underlines Aquaman's strong mythological framework. In addition, at the time of his birth, local television reported on the Tropical Storm "Arthur". The hero differs significantly from the numerous comic book versions of himself, especially due to his exotic appearance. Curry is not blond with pale skin (these features, paradoxically, fully apply to Orm, his half-brother and main opponent), but rather a heavily muscled, dark-haired man.

It is reasonable to presume that the movie's international success is partly associated with the "global" nature of the depicted events. The prologue portrays the past, mainly the circumstances preceding Arthur Curry's birth. These events occurred in 1985, in a fictitious coastal town called Amnesty Bay, Maine. This is an important location associated with the superhero's personal history, as the narrative repeatedly goes back in time, highlighting key moments of Aquaman's childhood and adolescence. A romantic subplot involving his parents is located within the premises of the local lighthouse. Arthur Curry's parents have been separated for a long time, although not voluntarily. Now an adult, Curry irregularly returns to Amnesty Bay to visit his father. However, the visually and narratively dominant environment is represented by the fictitious underwater empire of Atlantis, which is an important part of ancient mythology. The spectacular portrayal of the Atlantis is, in many ways, inspired by similar locations included in blockbuster films produced by different companies. As it seems, the Atlantis can be accessed only via a rainbow-like bridge (a similar visual interpretation of a bridge is also present in the film trilogy centering on the

superhero Thor, released by Marvel Studios), and some districts of the underwater city have similar design of lighting and flora as the planet Pandora (depicted in the feature film *Avatar* released by 20th Century Fox in 2009). The moment the protagonist (as a child) reveals a part of his superhuman abilities takes place in Boston's "water world" called the New England Aquarium. Much later, while searching for a magical object (Atlantia's Sacred Trident), Aquaman travels across the Sahara Desert and then visits architectural monuments in Sicily. Some action elements of the story (the battle with a sea monster, the rescue of a Russian submarine) occur in unspecified places below the ocean's surface. The individual locations are mostly fictitious (the exceptions being the Sahara Desert, the Boston Aquarium and the island of Sicily).

BORN TO RULE THE ATLANTIS: AQUAMAN AS A FAIRY TALE

The basic assumption we work with is that *Aquaman* the movie functions as a late modern fairy tale. "Fairy tale" is often defined as a subgenre of fantasy. C. Baldick explains that "fantasy" is most often seen as a general term for any kind of fictional work, which is not devoted to realistic representation of the known world; at least not primarily. Fantasy tends to portray imagined worlds, in which magical powers and other impossibilities are accepted or rather expected to appear. When talking about "fairy tale", the author argues that it is a traditional folktale adapted and written down for the entertainment of (mostly) children. It features marvelous events and characters – e.g., princesses, talking animals or witches.[5] Our aim is to interpret *Aquaman*'s narrative with emphasis on the movie's genre structure, which is, as we believe, dominated by fantasy (fairy tale). However, other genres are included as well. We might even point out that the film in question is based on science fantasy. According to T. Mirrlees, science fantasy is probably the most effective genre hybrid of today. This specific combination of science-fiction and fantasy is so successful thanks to its ability to fulfil the expectations of young viewers, visual formability (such a genre hybrid can be effortlessly transformed into a digital game or a toy collection) and tendency to arouse fan interest in "esoteric knowledge" about the work itself (the audience is interested to learn more about this engaging, fascinating fictional world, to get to know it better).[6] The mentioned combination of genres allows producers to use the means of expression of the individual film types (the magical aspect of fantasy, the tendency of science-fiction to depict the future or other planets, and the spectacular scenes of destruction typical for action films).[7]

E. Branigan comments on V. Propp's approach to the developmental logic of narrative organization by saying that its point lies in identifying various actions that are present in storylines. Although they might differ, they fulfill the same functions. Propp actually found that in a hundred Russian folktales, there were only thirty-one functions. Some of them might have been omitted in particular cases, but they mostly occurred in the same order in all the stories.[8] *Aquaman*'s movie story is, of course, made in Hollywood, on basis of American cultural

values and universally entertaining topics suitable for international distribution. And yet we can observe that the analyzed motion picture's narrative structure largely corresponds with Propp's morphology of a fairy tale.[3] The following analysis thus merges Propp's approach towards fairy tales and their narrative structure with discourse elements that establish connections between traditional fantastic stories and late modern cultural phenomena.

Aquaman's story begins with the phase of **absence**. Most of his later actions are driven by the need to cope with the moment when his mother decided to leave her husband and son to keep them safe. This forced division of his family provides the storyline with certain tension. As an adult, Arthur Curry expresses his anger due to the fact that Atlanna, former Queen of the Atlantis and his mother, is now missing and presumably dead just because she left her realm, loved Arthur's father and bore him a son. **Interdiction**, i.e., the moment Curry's story complicates occurs when he rescues a Russian submarine under a pirate attack, leaving the two ruthless mercenaries who planned the attack, a father and his adult son, to die inside the sinking vessel. However, David Kane, younger of the two, survives and he will later become Black Manta, one of Aquaman's most dangerous enemies. Aquaman thus **violates the interdiction**, which means that Jesse Kane dies. The viewer then finds out that the Kanes work for Orm, Arthur Curry's stepbrother, the current emperor of the Atlantis. Orm plans to openly attack the "surface-dwellers", meaning people who live on the Earth's surface. The Kanes were not able to defeat Aquaman, but David Kane still delivers Orm the submarine. During the phase of **reconnaissance**, Orm stages a triumphant arrival to the underwater kingdom of Xebel, seeking allies who would support his war efforts. Xebel's king, Nereus, reminds Orm that he has an older half-brother Arthur that may make a claim to the throne (**delivery**; the villain now focuses on eliminating his intended victim). Following this moment, Orm earns Nereus' trust through arranging and seemingly stopping an attack of the dysfunctional Russian submarine against Xebel. This means that he uses **trickery** to acquire something he values – Nereus' loyalty and army.

The above-mentioned military alliance allows Orm to inflict a massive tsunami wave, i.e., to directly endanger Arthur Curry's remaining family and all people living in coastal areas, which are now flooded by toxic waste (**complicity**). By doing so, the villain harms Tom Curry – Aquaman's father barely survives the tsunami, almost drowning after his car is hit by the water and debris (**villainy**). The phase of **mediation** closely introduces another important character – an Atlantean Princess named Mera, Nereus' daughter. Mera saves Tom Curry's life and warns Aquaman that Orm is assembling a huge army to attack and eventually exterminate the "surface-dwellers". Considering this information and the previous events, Arthur decides to act (**counteraction**). The hero agrees to join Mera, which also means that he is reminded of his royal heritage. They leave together and the main protagonist prepares for his first visit of the Atlantis (**departure**). **The first function of the donor** is depicted via a flashback uncovering crucial moments of Arthur's teenage defiance. His helper is Vulko,

Atlanna's trusted ally who tries to teach him how to live, fight and think like a true Atlantean, although with no success. This moment is used to better explain Arthur's ability to "understand" all sea animals and extraordinary invulnerability when it comes to conventional weapons such as guns or knives.

Secretly entering the Atlantis, Aquaman meets Vulko again and acquires information on Orm's skills and powers. He also learns about the mythical Trident of Atlan, an ultimate weapon made of Poseidon's steel that would allow the one who wields it to rule the Atlantis (**hero's reaction**). The map leading to the lost Trident should be acquired thanks to an ancient recording provided by Vulko (**receipt of a magical agent**). However, the hero's presence in this hostile environment is uncovered and he is transferred against his will – to face Orm for the first time (**guidance**). Captured and chained, the main protagonist expresses his stubbornness and self-confidence by challenging Orm, demanding the Combat of the Kings (**struggle**). Arthur is also insulted because of his lineage – Orm calls him a "half-breed", since his father is just a "surface-dweller". While waiting for the Combat to begin, Aquaman refuses Vulko's reasonable arguments. He is **branded** (marked) by wearing Atlantean armor. The phase of **victory** is replaced by **defeat**, because Arthur is not strong enough to prevail. However, Mera's intervention allows him to escape from captivity (**liquidation**). Both of them are presumed dead.

Aquaman is now supposed to **return** (go back home). He does return, in a sense; however, it is still necessary to find the Trident, because without it, Arthur will not be able to face Orm again. However, Orm soon finds out that both Arthur and Mera are alive and looking for the Trident. Orm contacts David Kane, providing him with Atlantean armor and technology. Kane now becomes Black Manta and seeks to kill Aquaman and his associate (**pursuit**). Arthur is once again **rescued** by Mera – even though he defeats Black Manta, his wounds are quite severe and he would not be able to travel without her help. The couple's **unrecognized arrival** to the Trench (where Arthur's mother was executed for high treason and where the Trident should be) transfers Aquaman and Mera to a mythical world. The hero finds out that his mother Atlanna is actually alive and strives to obtain the Trident so all of them can have a chance to return. No clear **unfounded claims** occur.

The hero faces a **difficult task** once again. In order to acquire the Trident, he has to defeat a mythical creature called Karathen, the guardian of Atlan's body and the weapon itself. Arthur proves that he is worthy of wielding the Trident not by using his physical strength, but rather by his ability to understand the creature and communicate with it (as the first man since Atlan, the original owner of the artifact). Since the hero is deemed worthy, he succeeds and rips the Trident from Atlan's hand (**solution**). Based on these actions, Aquaman becomes "the one true King of the Atlantis" (**recognition**). Arthur thus saves both Mera and Atlanna, returning back to the Atlantis to challenge Orm. He does so at the moment when Orm is trying to gain another important alliance by attacking the Brine Kingdom.

Arthur's interference leads to Orm's defeat (**exposure**). Wielding the Trident, Aquaman not only eliminates the attacking military force, but also uses this opportunity to demonstrate his true power – the ability to command all creatures living in the ocean. Aquaman's **transfiguration** actually happened before, when he obtained the Trident – he now wears golden armor fit for a King. The story arc closes by two essential concluding aspects – Orm's **punishment** (he is defeated and imprisoned) and "**wedding**". Arthur neither marries Mera nor he proposes to her, but he does become the King of the Atlantis.

CONCLUSION

Answering the first research question (RQ1), we may conclude that Aquaman the movie is primarily a fantasy feature film. Its narrative structure suggests that the work is not too different from classic fairy tales. The motion picture's main plot is obviously dominated by late modern fantasy centered on the past. Elements of fantasy can be identified within the circumstances leading to the hero's birth (Queen Atlanna refused a forced marriage and escaped the Atlantis, eventually falling in love with a lighthouse keeper). Another point worth mentioning is the Atlantis itself – the mythical "lost" underwater realm filled with knowledge, riches and technologies that are inaccessible and unknown to those who live on the solid ground. Arthur Curry or rather Aquaman finds its feminine counterpart in the stubborn Atlantean Princess Mera. Personalizing distinctively late modern character traits, Mera is no damsel in distress; on the contrary, her role is assertive, because she saves Arthur's life more than once, provides him with the necessary knowledge and stands by his side while facing their common enemies.

The previous analysis shows that Aquaman the movie does not follow Propp's morphology to the smallest detail (RQ2), but it does function as a late modern fantasy story inspired by classic fairy tales. For example, the phase of **interdiction** (someone trying to warn the hero against some action) is outlined only implicitly. Arthur's father does not try to stop him, he only suggests that the hero's tendency to interfere and help is a logical consequence of his mother's temperament and character. Moreover, when trying to defeat the villain (**victory**), Aquaman does not prevail and has to accept Mera's help to escape and survive. Furthermore, there are no **unfounded claims** and Arthur's **transfiguration** occurs prior to defeating Orm (**exposure** and **punishment**) – at the moment when he obtains the Trident.

The massive military conflict between hostile underwater kingdoms is largely fantastic as well. The presence of magical artifacts is evident and important, especially in the case of Atlan's Trident, allegedly the creation of the Greek God Poseidon. However, the movie's visual elements are dynamic thanks to the used genre conventions of action films. We may mention the moments when the main protagonist rescues a submarine attacked by modern-day pirates, escapes a tsunami in his car or fights against a mercenary dressed in a futuristic battle suit. Later he faces a mythical monster and finally defeats his half-brother, the King of

the Atlantis. All these scenes are action-based and spectacular. On the other hand, the included science-fiction elements are only complementary and their significance is thus limited. Their visible manifestations are tied to vessels with futuristic design and technologically advanced combat suits, which allow the ordinary people living in the underwater world (the Atlantis) to breathe on the Earth's surface – it is clear that only the highborn like Arthur, Mera or Orm are able to breathe in any environment.

The movie in question involves many different social meanings typical for late modern cultural framework. They are represented and embodied by its characters. As noted by A. Plencner, D. Kral'ovičová and M. Stropko, visual and narrative functions of feature films include much more than their aesthetic frameworks. Any movie narrative – even Aquaman's storyline that is largely driven by fantasy tropes – thus has to refer to elements of everyday life and depict “ordinary” struggles the audiences are able to sympathize with. These aspects might be defined as “social meanings” and filmmakers use them to emphasize the authenticity of their motion pictures.[9] The film is dominated by **man's struggle against nature** (although Aquaman is a metahuman, a superhero). Arthur Curry can spend any amount of time underwater and talk while swimming in the ocean. The motive is also present in the scene when the tsunami hits the coast of Maine and the main protagonist tries to save his drowning father. The binary opposition of **good against evil** is closely linked to encountering **irrational forces**. Aquaman stops the impending military conflict between the inhabitants of the Earth and the people living in the Atlantis. The conflict is personalized by his half-brother Orm, along with the motive of **conspiracy**, as Orm tries to control all the underwater kingdoms through various lies and intrigues. However, Arthur reaches his goal and along the way he finds his (allegedly dead) mother. Trying to help her and at the same time acquire the ultimate magical object (Atlan's Trident), he challenges a mythical sea monster (**irrational force**). Aquaman's mother, Atlanna, portrays “**Promethean revolt**” (she left her underwater kingdom and chose a simple life alongside an ordinary man). The **desire for love** is tied to all her actions – the hero's parents meet again at the end of the story, despite many years of separation. Aquaman also fulfills his role of a **savior**. He becomes the King of the Atlantis, prevents war and millions of casualties and, as a representative of both worlds, maintains a delicate balance between the “surface-dwellers” and the inhabitants of the underwater empire.

Regarding key elements of late modern culture included in the story (RQ3), the analyzed movie is marked by infantilization. According to B. Barber, this is a necessary outcome of the imperatives of late modern global economy, which maintains its growth thanks to producing more goods and services than we need (and can consume). This strengthens the economic importance of children and adolescents.[10] Although Arthur Curry is a grown-up man, his reactions are often comically immature (e.g., while escaping Orm, he mentions that his intention to travel “in the belly of a whale” is inspired by Pinocchio. Mera later finds out that “Pinocchio” is not a military strategist, but a character from

a children's book which Arthur has never read). The movie's narrative also reflects on contemporary discussions on climate change and global warming. Pollution of the oceans provides Orm with a cause – in his words, it is legitimate to wage war against the “surface-dwellers”, because they pollute waters and poison the children of the sea, making the skies burn and the oceans boil. The most obvious manifestation is associated with the aftermath of the massive tsunami. These tidal waves cast tons of toxic waste, which is currently disrupting the oceanic ecosystem, ashore; in front of everyone's eyes. However, the tsunami is a clear act of aggression too, as it causes widespread destruction of humanity's defensive and offensive naval forces stationed across the high seas. Today's media culture is portrayed through the phenomenon of “selfie photograph” (holding an absurdly pink smartphone, Arthur's compatriots from Amnesty Bay insist on taking a picture with him, because they are his fans). The film openly acknowledges its fantasy roots by placing H. P. Lovecraft's novella *The Dunwich Horror* inside Tom Curry's home. Jules Verne's work is mentioned as well; the movie's prologue refers to one of his fantasy stories. The quote comments on Aquaman's parents and their love, claiming that when two ships are put together in the open sea without wind or tide, they will eventually come together. Other pop culture references include using a remix of Depeche Mode's song *It's No Good* at the moment when Black Manta experiments with his battle suit. The same intradiegetic principle is applied when Arthur and Mera visit Sahara – the initial part of their rather awkward desert adventure is acoustically accompanied by a remixed version of Toto's *Africa*.

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